

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia

May 25, 2009

Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you. Thank you, Admiral Mullen, for that generous introduction and for your sterling service to our country. To members of our Armed Forces, to our veterans, to honored guests, and families of the fallen: I am deeply honored to be with you on Memorial Day.

Thank you to the superintendent, John Metzler, Jr., who cares for these grounds just as his father did before him. To the 3d Infantry Regiment who, regardless of weather or hour, guard the sanctity of this hallowed ground with the reverence it deserves, we are grateful to you. To service members from every branch of the military who, each Memorial Day, place an American flag before every single stone in this cemetery, we thank you as well. We are indebted to all who tend to this sacred place.

Here lie Presidents and privates, Supreme Court Justices and slaves, generals familiar to history and unknown soldiers known only to God.

A few moments ago, I laid a wreath at their tomb to pay tribute to all who have given their lives for this country. As a nation, we have gathered here to repeat this ritual in moments of peace, when we pay our respects to the fallen and give thanks for their sacrifice. And we've gathered here in moments of war, when the somber notes of "Taps" echo through the trees and fresh grief lingers in the air.

Today is one of those moments where we pay tribute to those who forged our history, but hold closely the memory of those so recently lost. And even as we gather here this morning, all across America, people are pausing to remember, to mourn, and to pray.

Old soldiers are pulling themselves a little straighter to salute brothers lost a long time ago. Children are running their fingers over colorful ribbons that they know signify something of great consequence, even if they don't know exactly why. Mothers are re-reading final letters home, clutching photos of smiling sons or daughters, as youthful and vibrant as they always will be.

They, and we, are the legacies of an unbroken chain of proud men and women who served their country with honor, who waged war so that we might know peace, who braved hardship so that we might know opportunity, who paid the ultimate price so that we might know freedom.

Those who rest in these fields fought in every American war. They overthrew an empire and gave birth to Revolution. They strained to hold a young union together. They rolled back the creeping tide of tyranny and stood post through a long twilight struggle, and they took on the terror and extremism that threatens our world's stability.

Their stories are the American story. More than seven generations of them are chronicled here at Arlington. They're etched into stone, recounted by family and friends and silently observed by the mighty oaks that have stood over burial after burial.

To walk these grounds then is to walk through that history. Not far from here, appropriately just across a bridge connecting Lincoln to Lee, Union and Confederate soldiers share the same land in perpetuity.

Just down the sweeping hill behind me rest those we lost in World War II, fresh-faced GIs who rose to the moment by unleashing a fury that saved the world. Next week, I'll visit Normandy, the place where our fate hung on an operation unlike any ever attempted, where it will be my tremendous honor to address some of the brave men who stormed those beaches 65 years ago.

And tucked in a quiet corner to our north are thousands of those we lost in Vietnam. We know for many the casualties of that war endure. Right now, there are veterans suffering and families tracing their fingers over black granite not 2 miles from here. They are why we pledge anew to remember their service and revere their sacrifice and honor them as they deserve.

This cemetery is, in and of itself, a testament to the price our Nation has paid for freedom. A quarter of a million marble headstones dot these rolling hills in perfect military order, worthy of the dignity of those who rest here. It can seem overwhelming. But for the families of the fallen, just one stone stands out, one stone that requires no map to find.

Today, some of those stones are found at the bottom of this hill in Section 60, where the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan rest. The wounds of war are fresh in Section 60. A steady stream of visitors leaves reminders of life: photos, teddy bears, favorite magazines. Friends place small stones as a sign they stopped by. Combat units leave bottles of beer or stamp cigarettes into the ground as a salute to those they rode in battle with. Perfect strangers visit in their free time, compelled to tend to these heroes, to leave flowers, to read poetry, to make sure they don't get lonely.

If the fallen could speak to us, what would they say? Would they console us? Perhaps they might say that while they could not know they'd be called upon to storm a beach through a hail of gunfire, they were willing to give up everything for the defense of our freedom; that while they could not know they'd be called upon to jump into the mountains of Afghanistan and seek an elusive enemy, they were willing to sacrifice all for their country; that while they couldn't possibly know they would be called to leave this world for another, they were willing to take that chance to save the lives of their brothers and sisters in arms.

What is this thing—this sense of duty? What tugs at a person until he or she says, "Send me"? Why, in an age when so many have acted only in pursuit of the narrowest self interest, have the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines of this generation volunteered all that they have on behalf of others? Why have they been willing to bear the heaviest burden?

Whatever it is, they felt some tug; they answered a call; they said, "I'll go." That is why they are the best of America, and that is what separates them from those who've not served in uniform: Their extraordinary willingness to risk their lives for people they never met.

And my grandfather served in Patton's army in World War II, but I cannot know what it is like to walk into battle. I'm the father of two young girls, but I can't imagine what it's like to lose a child. These are things I cannot know. But I do know this: I am humbled to be the Commander in Chief of the finest fighting force in the history of the world.

I know that there is nothing I will not do to keep our country safe, even as I face no harder decision than sending our men and women to war, and no moment more difficult than writing a letter to the families of the fallen. And that's why as long as I am President, I will only send our troops into harm's way when it is absolutely necessary, and I will always provide them with the equipment and support they need to get the job done.

I know that military families sacrifice more than we can understand and feel an absence greater than we can comprehend. And that's why Michelle and I are committed to easing their burden.

And I know what a grateful nation owes to those who serve under its proud flag. And that's why I promise all our service men and women that when the guns fall silent and you do return home, it will be to an America that is forever here for you, just as you've been there for us.

With each death, we are heartbroken. With each death, we grow more determined. This bustling graveyard can be a restless place for the living, where solace sometimes comes only from meeting others who know similar grief. But it reminds us all the meaning of valor. It reminds us all of our own obligations to one another. It recounts that most precious aspect of our history and tells us that we will only rise or fall together.

So on this day of silent remembrance and solemn prayer, I ask all Americans, wherever you are, whoever you're with, whatever you're doing, to pause in national unity at 3 o'clock this afternoon. I ask you to ring a bell or offer a prayer; say a silent thank you. And commit to give something back to this Nation, something lasting, in their memory, to affirm in our own lives and advance around the world those enduring ideals of justice, equality, and opportunity for which they and so many generations of Americans have given that last full measure of devotion.

God bless you, God bless the fallen, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:18 a.m. in Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Adm. Michael G. Mullen, USN, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, who introduced the President; and John C. Metzler, Jr., superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Memorial Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Metzler, John C., Jr.; Mullen, Michael G.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha".

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